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Interview with Albert E. Hemsing

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Entrance Into USIA Via Marshall Plan Information Work

Q: Mr. Hemsing's distinguished career with the U.S. Information Agency is a story of success and achievement in positions ranging from Motion Picture Officer, to Area Director, to Minister for Public Affairs in India, the Agency's largest overseas post.

Al, we might as well start with a chronological beginning. How did you become interested in USIA and motivated to join?

HEMSING: Actually, I was co-opted into USIA, as were most of us working in the information program at the Marshall Plan's European headquarters in Paris. I had gone to work for ECA, the Economic Cooperation Administration, which administered the Marshall Plan, in 1951.

In 1953, two things happened. ECA became MSA, the Mutual Security Agency; reflecting the change from economic aid to Europe to military aid, under the pressures of the Cold War. Also, that year, the U.S. Information Agency was born. It took over, among other programs, responsibility for the information activities of MSA.

1953: The Tragi-Comic Visit of New (and First) USIA Director Ted Streibert to Paris Tore Up the Highly-Skilled and Efficient Information Service (the MIS) Inherited from ECA Probably to Detriment of Future USIS Operations in Europe

My first encounter with USIA, aside from noting that I had a new paymaster, came in the person of the Agency's first director Ted Streibert and that was a kind of tragi-comedy.

Shortly after taking office, Streibert announced a trip to Europe. Rumors reached us that his purpose in Paris would be to shut the entire MSA information operation down.

Our information chief was Waldemar Nielsen. His deputies were Eugene Rachlis and Hugh Sutherland. Peter Handen, a cracker- jack architect, headed exhibits. Lemuel Graves ran press; Dick Driscoll was in charge of radio. Our executive officer was Jim West, who later married Mary McCarthy, the writer. Nils Nilson was in charge of motion pictures and I was his deputy. It was a great shop, not least because we had assembled a very able, dedicated European staff. We were housed in what had been a nightclub at 5 Avenue Gabriel, opposite the embassy.

Our strategy for the Streibert visit was to convince him that, in us, he had inherited a unique asset, one that could serve USIA well. Specifically, we would concentrate on our media accomplishments in support of NATO and the common defense of the Atlantic Community.

Not ten minutes into the briefing, Streibert began to fidget. He asked, “What is NATO anyway, and why should we be supporting it?” [Laughs] You can imagine how that took the wind out of our sails.

It was soon clear that our odd-ball operation did not fit into his concept of USIA's country-by-country mode of operation, and we were finished.

So we asked Streibert to break the news to our European staff himself. This was to be done next morning, when we would assemble our 100-or-so employees in the only room large enough—the exhibits workshop. Though we had stressed that our “locals” were by no means all French, but came from some 10-12 nations, that point somehow got lost overnight.

So, next morning, Streibert eased into the bad news by starting off with: “Our two nations have been tied together by bonds of friendship since the days of Lafayette,” and on and on. Well, at the end of his remarks what finally broke the tense silence was a little Englishwoman. She adjusted the monocle she always sported, jumped onto a drafting table at the rear of the crowd, and sputtered: “Sir, I want you to know just one thing, one thing, I am British!”

And so ended our glorious adventure with what was the largest and, I believe, most effective information program America ever undertook in Europe.

1955: Hemsing Closes Out MIS Mopix Shop In Paris;Transfer To Agency's Mopix Service

My own work in Paris would, however, last another two years. Within a few weeks of Streibert's visit, Nils Nilson was summoned to Washington. After his first dismal meeting with USIA's film chief Turner Shelton, he quit. He went on to become a successful film and TV executive in Europe. That left me to finish the large number of films already in the pipeline. Chief among these were the 15 films of the Atlantic Community Series—one film on each of the NATO countries. Like most of our films, the series was designed for theatrical distribution. Its purpose was to introduce the peoples of the Alliance to one another.

In October 1955 I shipped off to Washington the original negatives of the 260 films ECA/MSA had produced since 1947, closed the shop, and left for Washington myself to work for IMS, the motion picture service of USIA.

Some years later, in Berlin, I got to know Ted Streibert better, when he made several trips there on behalf of the General Mills Company. I not only came to appreciate his prowess at the piano, but found that he had learned a good deal about the world since the days when he had been catapulted into USIA, fresh from the Mutual Broadcasting Company. I told him then how I thought he missed a bet in 1953. A smaller version of our ECA/MSA information shop would have served USIA well. We could have become the Agency's media service center in Europe. Our group had learned how to communicate with Europeans on their own terms, something the Agency's Washington-tied media staffs never quite got the hang of.

My four years in Paris have remained for me a unique and rewarding experience, even after 28 years in the Foreign Service.

Winston Churchill called the Marshall Plan “the most unselfish act in history.” So it was, one that redounded to our immense credit and, of course, one that also promoted our own prosperity. Unfortunately, in the years that followed, our policy-makers drew many a false conclusion from the experience. The Marshall Plan was very much a success of a given time and place, a success that depended as much on the Europeans as on ourselves. Failure to grasp that fact, and our subsequent Cold War emphasis on military aid, led us into many a blind alley around the world.

But First: Hemsing's Bio-Sketch Before The MarshallPlan Experience

Q: This means that when you were drafted into USIA, you were already an experienced overseas information officer, in effect. What took you to that point? How did you get from New York City, where you were born, into the overseas information business?

HEMSING: Actually, I had not yet learned what a regular USIS information officer does. I did know that the USIS officers I met around Europe during my Paris assignment had nothing like 5 million dollars a year at their disposal. That was the size of our film budget.

These were counterpart funds, of course, local currency which the aid recipients put up to match our aid dollars.

Incidentally, I was not born in New York, though I grew up there. I was born in the Ruhr area, in Wuppertal. My parents brought me to America when I was two, and my brother, Paul, was twelve. They were victims of the 1923 German inflation. They had saved up enough on my father's skilled machinist's wages to buy the small apartment house they lived in, but they waited a bit too long, and their savings were totally wiped out. In retrospect, I can only say, Thank God! Though their new start in America was very hard on them.

Q: Did you grow up speaking German at home?

HEMSING: At first. How little German stuck with me I only came to realize when I prepared to go to Berlin in 1958. The daily language at home, in a not very intellectual home—a great home, but not very intellectual—was quite limited. And while I got to appreciate German literature at City College, that added very little to my fluency.

Q: You were graduated from the City College of New York in 1942.

HEMSING: Yes, and almost immediately landed a job with the East and West Association, an organization Pearl Buck had just founded to promote better understanding between Asia and America. I was hired as a book reviewer, but soon found they needed someone to run their motion picture program—and they let me try my hand at it. One of Miss Buck's ideas was to find ten Asian feature films that would help explain Asians to Americans. I reported to her that the films available at that time were so exotic they would probably put most Americans off. She didn't believe me, so I had the pleasure of sitting through hours of screenings with her until she convinced herself, listening all the while to her trenchant comments.

1943: Goes To Work In OWI's Overseas Film Division

That job, and my long-standing love affair with the movies, led me to think seriously of film as a profession. I stopped going to evening classes at NYU for my M.A. which, as a result, I only got in 1947, and enrolled at the CCNY Institute of Film Techniques. Four nights a week I studied with its founder Irving Jacoby, a fine documentary filmmaker and born teacher. When he joined the film branch of OWI's overseas division—the Office of War Information—he asked me to come along.

I seized the chance, among other reasons, because my feet, which had been a problem since birth, had landed me in the 4-F category; OWI provided me with a way to serve.

I started at OWI in January 1943. At first Jacoby asked me to screen hundreds of existing American shorts and documentaries, with a view to selecting those relatively few that carried a useful message for overseas audiences. We then wrote new narrations and sometimes re-edited the films. I became quite good at writing film narrations and learned the fundamentals of film editing. Along with OWI's original productions, some of our acquired films were voiced in up to 33 languages. Toward the end of the war, as my older, more experienced colleagues scrambled to get back into industry, I found myself put in charge of the worldwide distribution of OWI films. That was my introduction to a major administrative job.

Q: Your work for OWI, then, was mainly in New York City?

HEMSING: Yes, all in the Broadway film district, mostly at 35 West 45th Street.

Q: Then from OWI to Paris?

Department of State: U.S. Information and Education Division (USIE—a USIA Predecessor) Takes Over OWI Film Activities And Hemsing

HEMSING: Not quite. As OWI came to an end, the State Department's International Information and Education Division took over some of OWI's operations—even as it did the work of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.

Q: Nelson Rockefeller's operation.

HEMSING: Yes. Working for State, I continued essentially what I had been doing—supplying USIS posts at our embassies around the world with prints of the large selection of OWI films, and guiding the posts in promoting their use.

My supervisor was Herbert T. Edwards, whom I had already known for several years as chief of the State Department's small film operation. His office was in Washington, but he came to New York almost every week, where he and his wife maintained an apartment. India Edwards was, of course, the first woman to achieve a position of power in the National Democratic Party, though as I recall it, Herb was a Republican. He was a very decent man, a gentleman of the old school.

1946 Hemsing Sent To London To Clean Up OWIDiscontinued Film Program in UK

As the war came to an end, OWI operations abroad ground to a halt so suddenly that many a mess was left around the world. One such mess was in the UK where OWI had conducted a large film program. In November 1946 Herb Edwards asked me to go to London (”for one or two months at most”) to bring some order into the motion picture operation there, to write a report on what a more modest State Department film program there ought to look like, and, finally, to break in a new motion picture officer whom Herb was recruiting from UCLA.

I docked in Southampton on November 11, after ten stormy days on His Majesty's troop transport, the S.S. Franconia and arrived in London with something like the great expectations of Dickens' Pip. I was not to be disappointed.

The film program was in a mess. Among other things, I discovered a whole hangar at an RAF base near Oxford, piled perilously high with thousands of cans of U.S. feature films, 40 titles in 8-10 language versions, with some 20 prints of each feature. These were the films which OWI had stockpiled on behalf of the major Hollywood companies, so that they could be put into the movie houses the moment the U.S. Army occupied a new area. They had been reported “lost” more than a year-and-a-half earlier, and had been replaced with new prints at tremendous cost. Now they could only be sold as scrap.

On the weekends I used every minute to explore London. I had a great time in the museums, galleries, theaters and concert halls. Socially, I learned that American notions of British reserve were pretty much myth. Using my assignment to come up with a report on the recommended shape of a post-war USIS film operation as a calling card I got in touch with such British documentary “greats” as John Grierson, Edgar Anstey and others. They were kind enough to invite an American 25-year-old into their circle.

Objectively, of course, London was in terrible shape that harsh winter. Coal was very short, and food even in shorter supply. I remember, for example, a luncheon at the Oxford-Cambridge Club in Pall Mall with Sir Oliver Bell, head of the British Film Institute. The cavernous place had not been properly heated for months. Lunch consisted of about a dozen miniature European shrimp, lost on a silver platter. But, with several unrationed whiskeys before and a few glasses of port for dessert, we managed. Sir Oliver did not look like Mr. Beefeater himself for nothing.

1947: Budget Slash Freezes Film Program; Hemsing Returns To New York On His Own Soon To Find Himself Without a Job

There was only one hitch. The new films officer never did arrive. A hiring freeze had caught him between California and Washington—but not before he had sold his house and quit the University! So my “one or two months at most” dragged on into March, and my new bride back in New York quite rightly felt abandoned. When Herb Edwards failed

to answer yet one more of my telegrams (”either I come home now or I get assigned here with wife”) I simply got onto the first sailing of the S.S. America (after its conversion from a troop transport) and came home.

I could not have come back at a worse moment. Congress had just slashed State's information budget to shreds. Along with several dozen others, I got the sack in June 1947. A demobilized colonel got my job.

Begins Teaching At CCNY Film Institute

New York and the entire country were in the midst of the post-war recession. I determined to stay in motion picture work but could find no job. That Fall I began to teach at the CCNY Film Institute and, together with a leading labor-lawyer, organized a film co-op for unions and other non-profit organizations. Incidentally, I found that I loved teaching. Hans Richter, who had taken over from Jacoby as the Institute's director, became a life-long friend. He was the avant-garde painter and surrealist filmmaker—of among others, “Dreams That Money Can Buy.”

A film I made for the CIO Textile Workers, “Union At Work,” caught the eye of Harry Martin, President of the American News- paper Guild. Actually, he read an article of mine first. I had used the Saturday Review of Literature to chastise American labor for its inattention to the film as a vehicle of education and public relations.

1951: Offered Position With Marshall Plan FilmDivision in Paris

Anyway, Harry was in Paris at that time, early 1951, on leave from the Guild to work with the Marshall Plan. He headed the rather ambitious ECA labor information program directed to Europe's huge trade union membership.

My first inkling of all this was a telephone call from Washington: did I “want to go to Paris to make labor films for the Marshall Plan?” My answer was something like “thanks, but no thanks.” I felt that my four years in government had been enough.

But, when I reported the phone call to Esther that evening, guess what she said: “What, you turned down Paris!” So, we went to Paris. I remembered whom to call back in Washington only because he had the wonderful name of Ward Melody. To go to Paris, Esther gave up what might have developed into a real career at the New York Times. We did not foresee it at the time, but this was to be the first of several such sacrifices on her part.

We left for Paris in August 1951, on the Ile de France, first class. The Marshall Plan believed in supporting the use of “foreign bottoms.” Esther's mother was quite inconsolable at the shipboard farewell. Having fled the Ukraine at age 15, alone, she could not imagine why any sane person would want to go back “there.” My parents probably shared that sentiment, but left it unspoken. Also unspoken was the fact that my mother's heart was giving out, and that ours might be a final farewell.

I really should not take us to Paris without describing the job interview that got me there. Harry Martin came to New York to look me over, accompanied by Stuart Schulberg, head of the Marshall Plan's motion picture unit. Stu, I knew, was the son of B.P. Schulberg, the pioneer Hollywood producer, and brother of Budd, the writer. Later on, incidentally, Stu would become the long-time producer of NBC's Today Show.

We met at the Park Avenue apartment of Stu's mother. They offered me an FSS-3 position in the Foreign Service. Quickly calculating that at OWI the grades got better as the numbers went up, I allowed that I thought I was worth at least a 4 or a 5. While Harry choked on his bourbon, Stu stage-whispered, “It goes the other way”.

Now Story Returns To Hemsing's Assignment(1955) To USIA Mopix Service (IMS)

Q: I'm glad the Melody lingered on, so to speak. You went, then, to Paris, where you switched to the rolls of USIA, stayed there another two years, and then came to the Washington head- quarters of the new USIA.

HEMSING: To the old headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue, only at that time the address had not yet been inflated to the patriotic “1776”—it was still 1775 then.

I was put in charge of the Facilities Branch of the Overseas Operations Division of the Motion Picture Service. Though it carried a GS-15 grade, it was a kind of nuts and bolts job—supplying prints, projectors and parts to USIS posts abroad.

I did not mind; it gave me and our family time to adjust to this strange new post, Washington, D.C. I say family, because our daughter Josephine had been born in Paris in 1953. We named her after my mother, who died just before she was born, and not after Napoleon's Josephine, as many of our friends thought. They knew that from our top-floor Place Vendome apartment we could look Napoleon right in the eye.

Both Esther and I had come to love France and, at the last moment, OECD had offered me a post that would have kept us in Paris. Esther was all for it. I reluctantly said no, feeling that to become an international civil servant meant that we would probably remain there for the rest of our lives. Esther, born in America, saw nothing wrong in that, but the immigrant son in me balked. So we settled down in a rented place in Georgetown, and Esther taught high school English in the District.

Hemsing Finds IMS Assignment Trying, PartlyBecause IMS Director Turner Shelton

After about six months, I was promoted to chief of IMS' Overseas Operations Division, at GS-16. My Foreign Service rank remained FSS-1. I worked for Turner Shelton and his deputy Tony Guarco.

It was a trying time for many reasons. The Agency had not yet recovered from the McCarthy period, and in particular, not IMS. Shelton eagerly applied the “Red List” to screen out all would-be contract filmmakers suspected of fellow-traveler tendencies, real or imagined. Soon most capable filmmakers wouldn't give him the time of day, that was one of the reasons our USIS posts found the IMS output so poor.

As one of the few Foreign Service people in IMS, I enjoyed a certain “Narrenfreiheit” with Shelton, a jester's freedom, and I used it to needle him about his tendencies, especially his mania for classifying every nuts-and-bolts telegram to the field. Later on, when Shelton was appointed Ambassador to Nicaragua and became the great and good friend of the Somoza family there, I was not at all surprised.

1958: Transfer To Be Information Officer Berlin;Preceded By Four Months German Language Instruction

Q: You were in the film office for three years, 1955-58, then you were transferred to that city that is the microcosm of East-West relationships, then and still, Berlin. You must have many memories of that assignment.

HEMSING: Yes indeed. First, however, I ought to say a word about Bill Clarke the director of the European area at that time. By 1958 I was quite fed up with IMS. I knew Bill only from representing the Motion Picture Service at his weekly staff meetings. I approached him, saying, “It's about time for me to go overseas again, so why not in your area?”

Bill's reaction was, “Well, why not?” He first offered me Information Officer Madrid, after language training. I accepted. But then Information Officer Berlin came open and I was presumed to have some German. Mind you, I had absolutely no experience in dealing with the press, or any first-hand knowledge of an Information Officer's duties. So it was an act of faith on Bill's part—one for which I was forever grateful.

Q: But that was standard operation for the Agency in those days. They weren't testing for demonstrated capability then. They assumed that if a guy made sense, give him a try.

HEMSING: Yes, exactly. Berlin had been quiet for some years at that time, otherwise I would probably not have been asked to go.

June and July of 1958 I sweated out at the Sanz School on 14th Street, learning German four hours a day, one-on-one, with a wonderful teacher, an older Austrian mountain-climber with a horrible accent. But he gave me what I needed: grammar, and drill in specialized vocabulary. He made up word lists on his own time for me—political, journalistic and economic vocabulary, and social usage. I was not at all sorry that FSI, the Department's Foreign Service Institute, had been unable to accommodate me.

We arrived in Berlin in August. Berlin was indeed quiet and surprisingly green, the kind of big city of over 2 million in which Esther and I, as New Yorkers, felt reasonably at home from the very beginning.

We lived in a lovely part of town, Dahlein, and argued our too-young Josephine into a German school down the block. She continued in German schools until she was 13.

November 1958: Khrushchev's Ultimatum To Three Western Allies To Get Out Of Berlin Galvanizes World Attention To Berlin; “The Berlin Drama” Begins

But soon came November, and the Khrushchev Ultimatum which, as you remember, gave the three Western Allies six months to get out of town, or else!

Q: How did that affect you specifically?

HEMSING: The effect was immediate, Berlin became the focus of world attention, in a way that the city had not been since the 1947-48 Airlift and the June 1953 East Berlin uprising.

In no time at all the news organizations strengthened their bureaus and sent a stream of visiting newsmen.

What was in store for me became clear within a day or two. David Bruce, our Ambassador in Bonn, was scheduled to arrive in Berlin on a regular visit. He would be coming on his own Army train, the so-called Ambassador's Train, a left-over of occupation days, and would be accompanied by Mrs. Bruce. Because of the early hour of the train's arrival at the Army depot in Lichterfelde West, the Bruces never wanted to be met. But I forewarned his aide that this time the press would be on hand.

And were they! Reporters and dozens of photographers and TV people. As the Ambassador started to step down from the train, his two dachshunds, held on a leash by Mrs. Bruce, managed to scramble around his legs, and he stumbled on to the platform. I quickly introduced myself and suggested a 're-take." So, that night, Berliners and TV viewers around the world saw a tall, dignified American calmly come to Berlin to assert America's resolve to stay in the city.

If this was "press handling", I was going to be OK; it was more like directing a film. And, in fact, the logistics, coordination and "people skill" required in motion picture work always stood me in good stead in Berlin. The Berlin drama, from the Ultimatum to the Wall, to President Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" visit, always played out on two very different levels—as a media event of parades, VIP visits, tank confrontations and grandstand speeches on the one hand, and as an intricate chess game of arcane political disputes and maneuvers, best analyzed in serious journals like the Neue Zuricher Zeitung or the Foreign Affairs Quarterly.

My on-the-job training progressed rapidly under Charles Blackman, the PAO and chief of USIS Berlin. Chuck, an ex-newspaper reporter, was an experienced USIS hand, and a willing, if testy, teacher. I came to appreciate him immensely. He and his wife Martha were splendid mentors for Esther and me both.

Our boss, in turn, the U.S. Minister, Was Bernard Gufler, an able, old-line career officer. His reputed heart of gold was kept pretty well hidden from junior officers like me. The Berlin Mission, as you probably know, was a “mixed economy”, reflecting our occupation status. Chief of Mission was the Ambassador in Bonn, his deputy was the U.S. Army Commandant in Berlin, a two-star general, and the day-to-day head of the Mission was the Minister.

Americans Greatly Appreciated As Ultimatum Wore Down To Expiration (May 1959) With No “Fireworks”

The Ultimatum period was one during which Berliners required a lot of reassurance. We Americans were highly prized and made to feel welcome in every way possible. Meanwhile, West German business enterprises put a hold on expanding their tax-supported operations in the city, and some quietly shifted the guts of their business to the Federal Republic. Governing Mayor Willy Brandt was at his best in those six months. He had a wonderful capacity for instilling confidence in his Berliners.

Eleanor Dulles made her contribution. As sister of our Secretary of State, she used her Economic Officer position on the Department's Berlin Desk to pay frequent visits and promote various schemes to bolster the viability of West Berlin. I thought the snickers she provoked among some officers on the Department side of the Mission were unwarranted. We stayed in friendly touch for many years.

Another source of reassurance to Berliners was the media play given to the many Congressmen and Senators who favored us with their visits. Between November 1958 and May 1959, when the Ultimatum expired, Chuck and I counted up something close to a quorum of both houses. All wanted their pictures taken by USIS for use back home—standing tall and courageous in the face of the Communist threat.

Q: With the Brandenburg Gate in the background, no doubt.

HEMSING: Exactly.

1961: East German Refugee “Hemorrhage” Peaks —

Q: That eased off, then, gradually, without anything more serious coming by way of confrontation. What else about Berlin? That was the time when many refugees were coming across. In 1961, it reached an apex of some kind.

HEMSING: Quite right. First of all, why the hemorrhage of refugees? Refugees had been coming across to West Berlin right along. But after the GDR put through its decree forcibly collectivizing agriculture, the nature of the refugee flow changed. Hundreds, and soon thousands, of farmers and their families came out, as well as the normal flow, which was more urban in nature. By May 1961 refugees were coming to the Marienfelde camp in West Berlin at the rate of 3000 a day.

— And Berlin Wall Goes Up In Mid-August

It became clear to everyone that this could not go on.

The Western Allies speculated on what the so-called German Democratic Republic authorities might do. Our intelligence people picked up word that new identity cards were being printed for the citizens of East Germany, color-coded cards, which would readily identify what part of the country the holder came from. This, it was thought, would allow the GDR to throw a control cordon around East Berlin and keep non-residents out. You see, we thought they might seal off East Berlin from the rest of the GDR and thus get a handle on their refugee problem.

Of course, that is not what happened. Instead, as you know, on the night of Saturday to Sunday, August 13, 1961, the GDR sealed off East Berlin from West Berlin—at first with barbed wire, then with a wall.

The timing could not have been better. President Kennedy was vacationing in Hyannis Port, as was Prime Minister Wilson in Northern England, and De Gaulle was at his country home in Colombie-les-deux-Eglises.

Q: August is August.

HEMSING: A summer weekend in August. For that reason, and, I'm afraid, for other, profounder reasons, Western reaction to the building of the Wall was painfully slow and uncertain. All the Western Allies dragged their feet, we more than the rest. This made a profoundly negative impression on the people of West Berlin and on Willy Brandt, the Mayor. In fact, I'm convinced it spurred his subsequent “Ostpolitik” initiatives.

For anyone really interested in the Wall, I recommend Curtis Cates' book The Ides of August, written about 10 years ago; it was very well researched. There is also Norman Gelb's The Berlin Wall, published in 1986, I think. Peter Wyden has also been in touch with me. He is doing a major book on the Wall for Simon and Schuster that is scheduled to come out late this year.

Bob, I could spend the rest of our interview talking about the Wall and its reasons and the turbulent months that followed. But let me try to recollect some of the highlights of the Berlin experience: the Ed Murrow visit; Al Lightner's armed-escort foray into East Berlin, when I sat with him in his Volkswagen; the tank confrontation with the Russians; and President Kennedy's visit. Oh, and the sojourn in Berlin of General and Mrs. Clay and Dr. and Mrs. James Bryant Conant.

West Berlin Morale Plummeted; Berliners Assumed Allies, Especially U.S., Had Known Of It In Advance

The Wall was, of course, a tremendous blow to the morale of West Berliners. Common sense told them that the all-powerful (they thought) Western Allies must surely have known what the East was up to. Axel Springer's newspaper Bildzeitung fanned that

speculation. At every turn we were faced by the no-win proposition that we (especially the Americans) were either stupid or perfidious.

Q: You had to try to convince them that you were stupid and not perfidious.

HEMSING: In effect, yes. The Wall boggled the mind. Let me give you an example. That wonderful journalist Joseph Wechsberg came to Berlin that September to do a three-part article for the New Yorker. The first question he asked as he checked in was: How do I find out how many apartment units could have been built with the preformed concrete slabs that were used to build the Wall? I put him in touch with the head of West Berlin's Building Trades Union. They figured out that, had the slabs been used for what they were intended, they could have build 20,000 small apartment units. Instead they built a wall 26 miles long. How, in retrospect, could the manufacture, transport, and storage of that number of slabs have escaped the huge contingent of U.S. and Allied intelligence people, civilian and military, who scrambled all over Berlin at the time? This is but one of the many signs which, with hindsight, should not have been missed.

Edward R. Murrow By Accident Came To Berlin The Night The Wall Went Up Adding To Suspicion Of Advance U.S. Knowledge

Ed Murrow. As you may remember, Edward R. Murrow, the new director of USIA, came to Berlin on the night of August 12, 1961. The visit had been planned weeks ahead, which is something else that Berlin journalists refused to believe.

Q: Which is the same night the Wall went up?

HEMSING: Yes. He arrived from Bonn at 10 PM, accompanied by Joe Phillips, USIA's European Area Director, and Jim Hoofnagle, the Country PAO. Chuck Blackman was on home leave in the USA. So, as acting PAO, I met them at Tempelhof Airport, together with Bob Lochner, the director of RIAS, the American-run German radio station in Berlin.

Bob and I took them to the Army's Wannsee Guest House and briefed them there, mostly on the headline-making refugee situation.

I left as soon a I could, after arranging that Lochner give Murrow and the others a tour of East and West Berlin next day.

Allied Intelligence And Thus, USIS Caught Flat-Footed By Wall

Just before going to the airport I had had two somewhat puzzling telephone calls—from Panitzer, who had just arrived in Berlin from Paris, where he was the European representative of Readers' Digest, and from a Reuters correspondent, also new to Berlin. Both had been in East Berlin and along the downtown East-West sector border around the Brandenburg Gate that evening. Both reported an unusual number of Volpos (East German police) and a sense of tension in the air. I checked with the Mission and Army duty officers and told the callers that there was nothing unusual, as far as we could tell.

Maybe it was only in retrospect that I came to ascribe a sixth sense to these reporters.

On coming home at about midnight, I had more calls of the same kind. I never did get to bed that night. I was not only the U.S. Mission press spokesman but, since the U.S. was in the Western Allied chair in the month of August, automatically also the Allied press spokesman.

By one A.M. Bob Lochner called me to say that RIAS had picked up an East Berlin radio announcement (which a few minutes later also ran on ADN, the East German wire service). The decree said that, with the backing of the Warsaw Pact states, the German Democratic Republic, to thwart the reactionary designs of West Germany and NATO, etc., was taking measures to protect its borders—including the border between East and West Berlin. There it was!

Soon I had dozens of phone calls from various reporters telling me (rather than asking) that barbed wire was being strung along the downtown sector-to-sector border, and presumably else- where; and about the angry reaction of the crowds there.

I used my second telephone, connected via the U.S. Mission switchboard, to try to get confirmation from the U.S. Army and U.S. Mission duty officers in the operations center—to no avail. All that night I seemed to be feeding them information (from journalists) while they had little for me, or so they said.

At first, Allan Lightner, the U.S. Minister, could not be reached at home, and I had to threaten the Army duty officer that I would call Al Watson, the Berlin Commandant myself, before they finally roused the general from bed.

Late in the night, I received a call from Lothar Loewe in Washington. He represented West German radio and TV there. We had become good friends after an initial series of friendly tiffs when he was a brash young reporter for a Berlin tabloid. Loewe asked for a complete fill-in on the night's events.

Lothar has been dining out on that telephone call story ever since. He insists that it was he who filled in the State Department's Berlin Task Force officials on the details of what was happening in Berlin, and so generated a higher state of alarm. That, in turn finally led to President Kennedy being notified on his yacht, off Hyannis Port, at about noon, Sunday, local time, or 6 P.M. Berlin time. Let me put a spoken exclamation mark in there!

Ed Murrow. Bob Lochner had taken Mr. Murrow all over Berlin from early Sunday on. The old reporter in Murrow was aroused. He carefully interviewed a flock of Berliners, East and West, that day.

An Allied Meeting Sunday—As Wall Was Still Going Up—Finally Agrees To Issuing Protest, But Secretary of State Rusk Kills it, And State Issues Protest From Washington 56 Hours Later; Berliners Dismayed

I was aroused too by the time I joined Murrow at the Wannsee Guest House on Sunday evening.

That morning I had attended a misery-filled Western Commandants meeting with a bleary-eyed Willy Brandt, who had been campaigning in West Germany for Chancellor in the upcoming national election. He had spent most of the night trying to get back to Berlin.

The meeting consisted mostly of hand-wringing. Nobody could suggest any major initiatives, Brandt included, though he later maintained otherwise. In fact, he had very little to say. Of course a protest to the Soviet Commandant was agreed; that was routine for “incidents” along the sector-to-sector border.

But even a quick protest was not to be. We had worked out tripartite agreed language for the protest, with the British group along only reluctantly. I was just ready to issue it to the press, when a telephone call came to Al Lightner, in his office, over an open, non-secure line. The call was from Assistant Secretary of State Foy Kohler. I couldn't believe my ears (I happened to be alone with Lightner) when Al started to plead for issuing the protest as soon as possible. Instead he learned that Secretary Rusk vetoed the idea. Washington would make the protest.

Many hours later, 56 hours from the time the Wall went up, I recall, Washington issued a protest, notable for its mild language. West Berliners, already angry, greeted the protest with dismay and anger.

Q: That is a long time.

HEMSING: Yes, with the West Berliners, and the world, awaiting anxiously what the Allies would say and do.

President Kennedy And Advisors Also Apparently Caught By Surprise; Until Then Kennedy Seems Not To Have Understood Significance Of Berlin Situation

Q: What's the best explanation now for the delay?

HEMSING: The Wall took the President and his closest advisors completely by surprise. Not withstanding the fact that the Mission's and our own daily USIS summaries of the East and West Berlin press reported that a crisis was clearly on the way.

Those of us who were in Berlin at the time came to realize, in retrospect, that the President had never really understood the Berlin situation, and maybe Secretary Rusk had not either.

In the mind's eye of those around Kennedy, East Berlin “belonged” to the Soviets while West Berlin was “ours.” From the time of the Khrushchev Ultimatum onward, the whole Western emphasis was on the Western Allies' right to be in West Berlin and to have access to it, and on their right of movement in all of Berlin.

That left moot the original Four Power-agreed right of free movement of Germans between both parts of the city. It was that right, and that reality in practice, that the Wall abrogated. And what was so bad about that? Our rights had not been touched. The GDR declaration had made sure that we understood that.

The reality of Berlin life, that thousands in East Berlin came to work in West Berlin every day, that West Berliners also worked in the East, and that tens of thousands crossed the sector-to-sector border every day to visit family and friends, that seemed not to have dawned upon Washington until the Wall went up. Briefed on these facts, the President is reported to have said “Why didn't somebody tell me!”

I would add some other factors. Germany and Germans were not exactly popular in the Kennedy White House—their very mention seemed to produce glazed eyes. Many have confirmed this to me. Then there was Kennedy's unfortunate summit with Khrushchev in Vienna, in June 1961, so soon, too soon, after the President's Bay of Pigs fiasco. The young President apparently came away shaken. The threat of nuclear war was a reality, and Berlin was certainly not worth that. Some historians have concluded that Khrushchev only agreed to let Walter Ulbricht, the East German dictator, build his Wall after the Soviet Premier took Kennedy's measure in Vienna.

Ed Murrow Sensed Depth Of The Blow To West Germans—Sent Personal Telegram To Kennedy Which May Finally Have Galvanized U.S. Government To Subsequent Actions

One of those who first told the President what a blow to West Berlin morale the Wall represented was Ed Murrow.

When I got to the Wannsee Guest House that Sunday night Murrow was smoking even more of the many Camels that finally were to kill him. We roundly applauded his decision to send a personal telegram to the President, giving an eyewitness account of his day in Berlin, and urging action to restore confidence at least to West Berliners.

Joe Phillips volunteered to get Murrow's thoughts down on paper, and pounded away on a typewriter. Lochner and I acted as a local resource, inserting required facts and figures.

Finally, Murrow took the draft and made the message his own in another hour of rumination, this time he was at the typewriter.

I looked over the message again on the way to the Mission's code room, on my way home. To this day I believe that Murrow's message helped tip the scale in getting the President to act. As you know, he sent Vice President Johnson to Berlin on the following weekend, accompanied by the hero of the Berlin Airlift General Lucius Clay. And, of course, we also

sent a U.S. Army battle group of 1500 men under Colonel Glover John up the Autobahn from Helmstedt.

Q: A show of strength.

HEMSING: Due to a series of snafus, the troops arrived unshaven, tired and slightly dirty, not show troops, but real righting men.

Q: Great.

HEMSING: Their march through West Berlin was sheer theater. It got a tremendous response.

Kennedy Sends VP Johnson To Berlin: Some Misfires Of The Johnson Visit; Bohlen's Briefing And Johnson's Own Insensitivity

The previous day, at the City Hall, the crowd had fired up the Vice President. He had departed from his prepared text and pledged “our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor” to defend West Berlin and its future. I was not the only skeptic among our Mission staff.

Another vignette I shall never forget was a press back- grounder for the White House press at Ambassador Dowling's Berlin residence. “Chip” Bohlen was in the Vice President's party and he soon dominated the dialogue, pushing his schemes for detente with Moscow. Never was there an occasion more insensitively out-of-sync with the local reality. I became very unhappy. Johnson just got bored and wandered off, followed by George Reedy. Reedy and I found the Vice President on the street, pressing the flesh, which made a good deal more sense than what was going on inside.

Because it was so impromptu, the Johnson visit was relatively painless, and certainly much welcomed by all of us at the Mission. He left the usual spate of Johnson stories behind. I'll just mention one. He admired the china at Brandt's official City Hall dinner, and

nothing would do but that the historic KPM porcelain factory be opened for his inspection that Sunday.

I stood behind Johnson as he asked the KPM director, “How much is that set, service for six?” “We would be honored to make you a gift, Sir,” was the reply. “Fine,” said Johnson, “make it service for twenty-four.”

Q: All the true stories about LBJ overseas would make a book.

HEMSING: They would, and I will tell you one later, about Johnson as President, at the Adenauer funeral.

1962: Attorney General Bobby Kennedy'sTrying, Insensitive Visit To Berlin

Q: We were talking off tape about Berlin and the visit of Attorney General Bobby Kennedy.

HEMSING: That visit, in February 1962, I found very trying. It was my first experience of the ruthless, athletic Kennedy gang in action, and of the, to me, dismaying projection of American imperial power abroad; that and the manipulation of the media.

His advance men, to give you but one example, had spotted a high school on the route the motorcade would take from the air- port. So it was arranged that a soccer match be going on there on the day of his arrival. And, sure enough, the Attorney General stopped the motorcade and joined in the game, along with his young son, while Ethel beamed. By the time I had occasion to accompany President Nixon on his five-city tour of Europe, much later, that gimmick had been given an official designation: “The unannounced human interest event of the day!” These serve the White House TV correspondents and their networks with manufactured-to-order coverage.

The Attorney General's behavior toward the U.S. Minister in Berlin was infra dig. So was it toward the faculty of the Free University.

A condition for his coming to Berlin was that the University confer an honorary degree on him. The faculty, at first, asked for copies of his published works in the law; honorary degrees in Germany are taken seriously. Our Cultural Officer had to do a lot of arm-twisting until the faculty got the message: this was an order!

At the Auditorium Maximum, where the degree was conferred, Bobby Kennedy began with “Today is the birthday of two distinguished Americans, George Washington and my brother Teddy.”

With which Teddy got up out of his front seat, turned to the audience and to the robed academics in their splendid colors, clasped his hands over his head, prize-fighter style, and beamed. All that day American reporters dogged him, “Now that you're thirty, will you run for the Senate?”

General Clay's Confrontation WithSoviets At Checkpoint Charlie

Of General and Mrs. Clay—I can only say that two finer and more decent Americans I never met. I served as Clay's press officer as well. Clay's very presence (for about 10 months), as the President's personal representative in Berlin, reassured the people enormously. He was a thorn, however, to the Army chain of command and to the Department.

Clay's not-so-secret agenda was to make it clear that the Soviets continued to have responsibility for all of Berlin, and that it was they, and not the East German regime, who were responsible for the Wall.

That opportunity came the evening of October 22, when the U.S. Minister and Mrs. Lightner were held up by Volpos at Checkpoint Charlie, on their way to an East Berlin theater performance. They were in their own car, a Volkswagen, with U.S. Army plates.

In accordance with practice, Lightner refused to show the Volpos his diplomatic passport because the U.S. Army plate was supposed to assure all of us free movement in Berlin. He was not allowed to enter. I got an immediate call from the Checkpoint, raced there, the first Mission officer on the spot, as it turned out. Meanwhile, Clay had gotten General Watson, the Commandant, and Lightner to agree to a test. If necessary, Lightner would enter East Berlin with an armed U.S. Army escort, foot soldiers with drawn bayonets.

At the scene, Al and I convinced Mrs. Lightner to get out of the Volkswagen. That courageous lady kept arguing not to change the original configuration. I got in instead. We went into East Berlin twice, each time with the escort.

The exercise did not please Washington at all, especially not when it evolved into the tank confrontation, a few days later, at Checkpoint Charlie.

We called up some of our tanks to the Checkpoint when free entry was again refused. From the East, nose to nose, came their tanks, bearing East German insignia. But, lo and behold, the tank drivers spoke Russian, as the press dully noted. So General Clay proved his point, it was the Russians who were responsible, and responsible for the Wall. It was the last initiative Washington allowed him to take. My most vivid memory of that day is of an old East German in shirt sleeves who used the very moment of the tank confrontation to come running across at breakneck speed, shouting, “Ich bin frei, Ich bin frei!”

Dr. and Mrs. Conant made their home in Berlin for nearly a year as the Ford Foundation's contribution to bolstering the viability of cut-off West Berlin. He served as advise to the Free University and worked with educators from all over Europe, attracting them to the city. Like the Clays, they made one feel proud to be American.

Q: We can't leave Berlin without the Presidential visit in 1963.

The Unfortunate Removal Of Chuck BlackmanFrom His Post In West Berlin

HEMSING: Right. But first I must tell you what happened to Chuck Blackman. It is not an edifying story.

When Ed Murrow came to Berlin he became so involved with the Wall that he probably forgot I was only the acting PAO. Furthermore I was not unfamiliar to him. About a year before the Wall, when Ed was on a year's sabbatical from CBS, I found him strolling along the Kudamm one Saturday afternoon. I introduced myself, and invited him home for dinner later that evening. Well, until two in the morning, Esther and I had a great time. We talked about CBS and USIA and Berlin, and all kinds of things, including his homesickness for his wife and son Casey, evoked by the voice of our young daughter, calling down from her bedroom for a glass of water.

On the occasion of the visit as USIA Director in August, 1961, Murrow postponed his departure from Berlin until Wednesday, August 16. As a result, Chuck Blackman arrived at USIS, bearing a copy of the Arizona Desert Gazette, with the Wall headline. Good soldier that he was, Chuck had abandoned his family on a cross-country trip, and flew back to Berlin as quickly as he could.

As was his style, Chuck entered the office with some quip about why I hadn't kept things quiet during his leave. No one who knew Chuck could have taken offense. But Murrow clearly did. That was to have consequences.

Some few months later Chuck's tour was cut short. He was ordered back to Washington and I was put in charge, for six months, at first, on an acting basis. So, even Ed Murrow could be guilty of the kind of unfair snap judgments we have all experienced in the Foreign Service.

June 1963: President Kennedy Visits Berlin

Thus when President Kennedy came to Berlin in June 1963 I was the PAO.

That day was certainly a high point for beleaguered Berlin, and a complete success for the planning that went into the visit by the Mission and USIS. We were given seven hours and 15 minutes, and the day's schedule was fine-tuned like a Swiss watch. No small thanks for that goes to the Berlin Command and the late Lt. Col. Louis Breault. I leaned heavily on his know-how and on the resources he commanded as Information Officer.

But, for me, the day started with a near fist-fight with Pierre Salinger.

Q: Had Pierre done the advance work, or was it other members of his staff?

HEMSING: It was mostly others. He came to Berlin for some hours while the Presidential party was in Bonn. That resulted in our having to raise the height of the TV platform in front of the City Hall, with workmen hammering away all night. Pierre was right about that.

He was dead wrong about the path the small White House pool press bus should take with him and me on it, as we left the welcoming ceremonies at the Tegel Airport in the French Sector.

To have the pool bus at the planeside on arrival, and yet to insert it up front in the motorcade, the bus, as rehearsed, would briefly move on its own, and then insert itself into the motorcade at the exit to the airport. The reason is now obscure to me, I think it had to do with security.

As the Presidents' car started to move, and our bus took the deviation, Pierre grabbed the driver and shouted, “Get into line, get into line, stay with the President,” while I grabbed the driver and told him to stick to his orders. Which, he did, and all went well. It was the only glitch all that day. But Salinger had been ready to sock me.

Later in the day all was sweetness and light.

On arrival at the City Hall, the President was to get out at the front entrance and go inside for the brief ceremony of signing the City's “Golden Book” for VIP visitors. Meanwhile, I had organized USIS and army staffers to lead various groups of the privileged press to their stations, using color-coded standards, held high.

Our White House pool bus used a rear entrance to get into the City Hall. But I had not counted on the huge spread of delicatessen meats and beer the city had laid on in the basement press room. Pierre fell on the food and pointed out to me that there were plenty of TV monitors. We could watch the President's speech from there.

I insisted on tearing him away to an upper balcony, above the President's where our only other companions would be German and American security people.

All during the President's address before that electrified audience of over 100,000 cheering Berliners, Pierre kept saying, “Gee I'm glad we came.” To this day I have visions of Pierre sitting out “Ich bin ein Berliner” in the basement, with a ham sandwich in his mouth. Somewhere I have a very warm than-you letter from him.

Q: That's a good story. That visit surely must be counted as perhaps the visit with the most impact of any foreign visit any American President has ever made, because of the context of the East-West relationship, because of the big crowd there. Would you agree?

HEMSING: Oh, yes.

Q: A memorable thing to have witnessed and to have worked on.

Berliners' Reaction Five Months LaterTo Kennedy's Assassination

HEMSING: On that very same spot, of course, I also witnessed what will always give me a chilling memory: the spontaneous public memorial to the President, the day after he was murdered.

It was a twilight ceremony in the same Rathaus Square where the President had spoken only so recently. Mayor Brandt gave a very moving speech. The Berlin police and our Army trumpeters played “Taps” across the vast space, from one rooftop to the other.

But what I remember most was the complete silence in which the 100,000 people broke up at the end. They moved down the side streets without a push or a shove, and did not utter an audible word. It was uncanny, and Esther and I were deeply touched as we moved with the crowd.

August 1964: Hemsing Becomes USIS Director For Germany

Q: What a dismal highlight. Perhaps we ought to move on from Berlin, which could fill the afternoon. You had moved up to PAO in Berlin and then on to Counselor for Public Affairs in Bonn and head of USIS Germany. That was in August 1964, and you were there for about three years.

HEMSING: My move to Bonn was entirely unexpected. I had been in Berlin six years at that time. In point of service I was the oldest in the Mission.

Don Wilson, the Deputy Director of USIA, had come to Berlin earlier that year, and, as he left, he asked me to become his special assistant in Washington. So we switched our daughter from the German school she had been attending to the U.S. Army School, to prepare her for schooling in Washington. I had passed the lateral-entry Foreign Service exam in 1960 and had been promoted to a career Class-2 officer in January 1963.

I had always gotten on well with the Ambassador, George C. McGhee, on his frequent trips to Berlin. Unlike his predecessor, he looked for opportunities to meet with the press and to participate in as many USIS functions as I could schedule.

But that hardly prepared me for his phone call: “I want you to come down to Bonn as Counselor and run USIS.”

I protested that I knew that a very able and senior Agency officer was slated to replace Jim Hoofnagle as PAO; furthermore that the USIS deputy there, Patricia Van Delden, was a Class 1 officer, and I only a 2. “It doesn't make sense,” I said.

His reply was, “Well, I want you, and I told Washington so.” A few hours later Don Wilson called me to confirm the assignment.

So much for the “independence” of USIA.

My theory then was, a theory I could never check out, that someone at State had bad-mouthed the USIA officer slated to go to Bonn—probably because he had done his job too well in defending the Agency from the Department's “shared administrative expenses” bill, a contentious issue that came up every year.

Q: Funny things happen.

HEMSING: Yes. And if that had been today, Pat Van Delden would probably have brought a sex-discrimination action against the Agency, and rightly so. She certainly was qualified for the job.

Instead, she proved to be an entirely loyal and willing deputy. We complemented each other well, since she had much more direct experience with the cultural side of the huge USIS Germany than I.

About the time I arrived in Bonn, in August 1963, (This actually had to be August, 1964.) a new USIS Executive Officer was also assigned there, John Clyne. John turned out to be a very strong pillar of our operation. On the personal side, we two boys from the Bronx understood each other. I was really saddened by his recent death.

As I said, the USIS Germany program was one of the largest in the world, what with our six Branch Posts and some 15 America Houses—our libraries and cultural centers. We

were blessed with a very able German staff, most of whom had been recruited soon after the war. I greatly enjoyed running this well-oiled machine, shaking things up just enough to get some of the routine and complacency out of the operation.

Cutback Of German Program Led To German Government Assumption Of Costs Of Retaining Five Amerika Hauser USIS Had Proposed to Close

Bob Lincoln became the Area Director, and felt he had the mandate from Director Marks to cut the German program in order to generate funds for new Agency needs in the Third World.

In a carefully-guarded plan, on a given day, we notified six German-American Institutes, and the mayors in those cities, and the Minister-Presidents of the states in which they were located, and the Cultural Office of the Bonn government, that these centers would have to go out of business; that we needed to withdraw our support and would no longer be able to supply USIS officers to direct them.

All but one, Koblenz, refused to “die.” The others, all located in university towns, fought back. City fathers pledged their support, money was found in city and state budgets.
I negotiated an agreement with the Foreign Office's Cultural Section for their financial support. Altogether, until this day, the Germans spend over a half-million dollars each year to maintain these institutions.

To understand all this, just picture the Goethe House in New York living off the American taxpayers' dollar through city, state and federal subvention!

Q: Anything more that we ought to talk about before we move on in your career? We've dwelt on Germany quite a bit.

USIS Was Deeply Involved In US Policy In Germany On Many Major Issues, But Support Of U.S. Policy In Vietnam Became Impossible

HEMSING: For me it was a period where I got deeply involved in the nitty-gritty of American foreign policy and in the day-to-day work of an embassy. Three times a week I participated in the Ambassador's Country-Team meetings. George McGhee was an activist Ambassador. He looked to USIS to help him on every bilateral or U.S.-European issue—from the annual offset-agreement with the Germans—to compensate us in part for the cost of stationing our troops in Germany; to trade issues, like the “chicken war”; to promoting the multilateral force idea—until President Johnson suddenly dropped that concept without warning in a Christmas-time meeting with Chancellor Erhard.

Q: The broad question on this—I'm sure it came up many times with you and other officers—is to what extent can USIS facilities shore up hard foreign-policy objectives. In greater or lesser degree that's part of what we have been assigned to do, but it doesn't always work as well with chicken backs and necks as it does with the world of ideas.

HEMSING: Exactly. The worst was Vietnam. McGhee had the idea, I'm using his words, “that USIS must do something to support our policy in Vietnam every day, 365 days of the year.”

Mostly that meant supplying Embassy or USIS officers to discuss Vietnam, on request from German organizations.

This soon became counter-productive. I wanted to limit our response to cooperation in more controlled situations—say where a professor asked for someone to participate in his seminar—not where students would run an open-to-all meeting to have an American to throw bricks at.

The Ambassador only relented when he himself experienced what we were up against. At a Cologne University ceremony the Rector had to sneak him out the back door when a well-organized band of students used the occasion to stage a riot about U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Q: Before we leave our focus on Bonn, which was such a pivotal assignment in those days, and still is, what other special meaning do you attribute to your work and times there?

President Johnson's Overbearing Visit ToGermany On Occasion Of Adenauer's Funeral

HEMSING: Well, one story, Bob, one observation on the atmosphere of German-American relations as I left Bonn.

The story has to do with President Johnson's attendance at Adenauer's funeral in 1967, in April, as I recall. I have a purpose in telling this story.

A funeral is, perforce, a solemn and yet impromptu affair. The moment “Der Alte” died, the Bonn government put a hold on all hotel rooms in the Bonn-Cologne area, in order to accommodate the expected dignitaries. The funeral services were to be held at Cologne Cathedral.

De Gaulle's party required three limousines on its way to the Cathedral. Johnson's party required fourteen.

Even on such an occasion, our Secret Service advance men took over DCM Marty Hillenbrand's residence, and boarded over the bookshelves in the master bedroom, (”The President doesn't like books in his bedroom”). They installed an outside pump to boost the water pressure. (”The President likes a strong shower.”) Incidentally, the pressure burst the old water pipes which we all suffered from in the “American Golden Ghetto,” and, according to reports, Johnson was left soapy the morning of the funeral.

The President had arrived, believe it or not, with seven houseboys, and his plane carried a full supply of Texas beef—for a dinner and luncheon he expected to give. (I must say I enjoyed the steak, the only time a President invited me to lunch.)

The hotel rooms in Cologne for which John Clyne had so savagely negotiated with the German government's press office—rooms for the White House press, were just as savagely dismissed as inadequate by the Washington advance men—”advance” by one day only.

Nothing would do but that the White House press be housed in the Petersberg, the splendid hilltop castle-hotel on the other side of the Rhine from the Embassy.

A small detail. There was no access from there to the Embassy, nor to the press filing facilities in Bonn, both being cut off by the Rhine. Not to worry. Put on two (hire) 24-hour motorpools on both sides of the Rhine, and hire one of the ferries to shuttle back and forth. Somehow, we managed to do as told. I appointed Gene Kramer on my staff Commodore, and put him in charge of the 24-hour ferry.

What I had not anticipated was that the White House press gang would fall in love with the ferry. No thirty-minute train ride for them, from Bonn to the Cologne funeral, like the rest of the world's reporters. They would sail to Cologne! Our Embassy's Administrative Counselor nearly had a fit when I asked him to lay on docking support, and to have the police clear a path from the Rhine to the Cathedral to accommodate the White House Press Office's wishes.

And sail they did, with a keg of beer and a supply of sausages, down the Rhine, to the funeral, a few singing along to a deckhand's accordion.

Well, Der Spiegel got hold of that story, and the story of the President's beef, and seven Filipino boys. Their Bonn correspondent (it was not his story) warned me. With the help of Guenter Diehl, the head of the German Press and Information Office, we managed to keep the most damaging story (with photo) of the ferry carnival out of the magazine; and Spiegel mentioned the houseboys only in passing. In a way I was sorry.

My point is this. Johnson may indeed have been “larger than life,” but to a greater or lesser degree this is how America's power is often projected abroad. You and I have worked on these visits. Why in God's name does our populist democracy tolerate such behavior?

And how can we expect objective coverage on our Presidents from a White House press that is so cosseted by him and his men? Or (as in my experience with Bobby Kennedy and President Nixon) so co-opted by the mutually-desired “theater” staged for their TV cameras?I'll leave it at that.

1967: The Changing Attitude Of Germany Toward America Was Not Understood By U.S. Administration Nor By Ambassador; Made For An Unhappy End Of Both Ambassador's And Hemsing's Tours

A sad note in my Bonn tour was the Administration's, the Embassy's and, especially, the Ambassador's inability to cope with the changing climate in Bonn. You will recall that Erhard's term as Chancellor, 1963-66, was really an extension of the Adenauer era of warm U.S.-German relations. Then came the “Big Coalition,” Chancellor Kiesinger (CDU) and Willy Brandt (SPD) as Foreign Minister. It was a period when they sought to distance themselves from the American embrace. This was met on our side by suspicion and dismay, especially suspicion about Brandt's “Ostpolitik.”

The Ambassador could not understand what was happening. Rumors floated that it might be time for a new U.S. Ambassador to come. He sought to knock these down. I advised that this could only be done by the German principals—the Chancellor or Foreign Minister. That never happened. Their behavior was foolish, but so was ours. America is slow in adjusting its foreign policy posture to changing climates. We pay too much mind to the comfort of dealing with old “friends.” That hurts us time and time again in a rapidly-changing world.

Unfortunately, it was in this climate that I left Bonn in August 1967, to accept nomination to the Department's Senior Seminar in Foreign Policy. I got the impression that the Ambassador thought I was deserting a sinking ship. I hoped he understood. He himself left about a year later. I had certainly been more loyal to him, and dealt with him more honestly, then some of the State Department colleagues I was leaving behind.

1967: Hemsing Goes To Department State'sSenior Seminar

Q: Then you went from Bonn, in August 1967, for an academic year with the Senior Seminar in Washington. A year off, as it were, after all those pressures. Did that turn out to be what you had hoped for?

HEMSING: Pretty much, though our 10th Seminar hardly proved to be a “School for Ambassador,” as the Seminar is sometimes billed. We were a very individualistic, competitive, and odd-ball lot. Our “guru” was Ambassador Lewis Jones, and we gave him a lot of trouble. Only two of our bunch later made it to ambassador rank. Our military members did better in their hierarchies; out of four, one made general, another admiral. My USIA colleague Art Bardos and I were the only two to graduate without an onward assignment.As you know, the opportunities for discussion with top government officials of all kinds, the trips around the U.S., nine of them I think, which the Seminar offers, are without parallel. It was quite a year, 1968, to study the soul of America. But, at the last moment all our long-planned, and well-researched individual study trips overseas were canceled. To save the “gold outflow.” We had to switch to individual domestic trips, pronto. Esther solved my quandary by suggesting that I study U.S. regional theater. I found the idea so good that we decided she would come along at our own expense. Our trip produced a very respectable paper.

Our last stop but one was Dallas. We were looking at the school book warehouse where President Kennedy had been shot when knots of people around TV sets alerted us to the news that Martin Luther King had been murdered. A coincidence that truly shook us up.

We hurried home when our daughter, Josephine phoned to say that she could smell 14th street burning all the way to our Old Town Alexandria house.

Q: Despite that experience, a year like that often does wonderful things for recharging batteries. Then you went on to the Agency headquarters and became Deputy Assistant Director for Europe.

1968: Deputy Assistant Director For Europe;Then Assistant Director (1969)

HEMSING: Yes, deputy to Bill Weld.

Q: That should have been good training for your subsequent assignment as Area Director for Europe.

HEMSING: It certainly was. I had nearly a year with Bill before he left to become PAO in London. We became very close, for he was a very fine man. Some people object to this kind of “revolving door”—first he's my boss, then I became his. Actually he was already my boss when I was still in Germany. But that happens all the time in the Foreign Service.

Q: Absolutely. What special memories about the Area Director job do you have?

HEMSING: Our Wednesday brown-bag lunches—you and me and the other area directors together.

Memories Of Frank Shakespeare As Director of USIA

Frank Shakespeare looms large in my memories. I always liked Frank, and indeed Teddy Weintal. I didn't much like their politics, but they were real people, not stuffed shirts. When Frank asked me to become Area Director, I made a point of telling him that I had voted the Democratic ticket all my life. That amused him.

I found Frank an amazingly quick learner for someone who had come to the job, as Agency director, with no foreign affairs background and almost no overseas experience. He also had good instincts. When he asked James Burnham to take a look at our USIS libraries in Europe, to see if the collections were “balanced,” I told Frank about my last image of Burnham. It was at City College, with Burnham in his Brooks Brothers suit, concluding his remarks with: “And thus, gentlemen, you see the only hope is the international proletarian revolution.” That was at a meeting of a Trotskyite cell, of which I was a hanger-on. Now Irving Kristol and Seymour Martin Lipset, leaders of that group, were high priests of Neo-conservatism and Burnham was to advise on what books should go into our libraries. Unlike them, I had decided early on that Stalin was not just an aberration, and that Communism was not the answer. I was put off by their ideological fervor then, and now.

Q: Maybe that's why Frank agreed with you.

HEMSING: Whether or not he did, he readily agreed with my position on books at one of our Area Directors' lunches. My argument was this: Add “conservative” books to the USIS libraries if you want, but remove one book from the present collections and you're in trouble. That made sense to him, he wanted no “book-burning.”

Comments On Political Appointees To LowerLevel In USIA

Q: Before we leave this particular theme, this question of how political, how ideological, an agency such as USIA can, or should, be is an interesting one. You've touched on some of the currents and eddies that are sometimes felt. What other thoughts on that subject? Do you think USIA has, at times, been overly political?

HEMSING: Very definitely. I think that's the price you pay. There are pluses in a President's choosing, for one reason or another, his own man, or woman, as director of USIA, but there is a price. Any agency, any corporation or university, needs a flywheel.

It has to know where it came from and where it is going—what its goals are. Political appointees generally come with the idea that what has gone before must be bad, and only radical change will set things right.

Frank Shakespeare came into the Agency with an exaggerated idea of USIA's mission and power. Right off the bat he asked one of our most senior career people, “What are we doing about Cuba?” The answer he got was couched in how many hours of VOA broadcasts were being directed at Cuba. Frank, I am told, was much annoyed. “No, what I mean is, what are we doing to get rid of Castro?”

Starting as he did from there, it is almost a miracle that he came to understand our Agency's mission and limitations so soon. Thank God for the flywheel of bureaucracy that political appointees rile against at first.

Q: Shakespeare came in as part of the Nixon Administration, and he learned that there were limitations. A very bright guy, indeed. That is fascinating. Perhaps we could get into this another time, but the question of political appointees into lower-levels ranks of the Agency, or the Department, is another topic that comes up about every four years.

HEMSING: Yes. You and I experienced some of that under Frank. I understand that in the last eight years there has been a great deal more of that, reaching ever further down. It is clearly a bad idea. My objection has little to do with inhibiting the advancement of career people, although it certainly does that, especially on the ambassadorial level.

First of all, the political appointees generally leave by the time they have learned their jobs. But from the word go, it makes for unproductive tensions. Either they think they have special power or, more likely, their colleagues or employees do. That's counter-productive, and quite different from naming a few top political appointees to carry out the new administration's policies.

1971: European PAO Meeting Which Surfaced USIA Inability To “Sell” Vietnam Abroad Led To Hemsing's Transfer To Inspection Corps As Chief

Q: You were Area Director from 1968 to 1971, three years, and deputy for a year before that. Then you had some difficulties with Frank, or someone, and you moved over to become the Agency's Chief Inspector.

HEMSING: The issue was Vietnam, and it came to a head at a European PAO meeting I scheduled for Brussels in 1971. Foolishly, I had hoped to have only Frank Shakespeare and our PAOs. Naturally, we soon had a jamboree of Washington people—Teddy Weintal, Bruce Hershensohn and some eight more.

When we came to Vietnam on the agenda, I asked the PAOs to report on the climate in their countries and how our programming on that issue was going. The picture they painted was pretty dismal. Many felt as I had in Bonn;: Stick to Wireless File output on Vietnam and on press backgrounders, let's not make ourselves sitting ducks by programming speakers for open- to-all audiences so that the local bully-boys can have their fun.

Even on media output I urged caution. I had just seen a near-final cut of Bruce Hershensohn's hour-long Vietnam opus, in color, at a Washington screening. I found it incredibly naive. But all I said at the meeting was that such an investment of resources in the slow-moving film medium—the film had been in production nearly a year—was a gamble. Events moved too fast. And, of course, the film never did see the light of day.

Bruce took umbrage. In a choked voice he turned to the PAOs and said something like, “I want to know what each of you is doing to win the war. I think each of us must pledge himself, I have, to do something every day to win in Vietnam!”

Somehow the title of Senator Fulbright's book popped into my mind, and I answered, “We've all heard of the arrogance of power, Bruce, but this, this is the arrogance of impotence.” Well, that did it.

I ran into Perry Stieglitz recently after many years. Perry attended that conference as the CAO in Brussels. Unasked, he gave me a blow-by-blow account, and mentioned that I had done myself proud. I appreciated that, most of all that he confirm my own somewhat hazy recall of the meeting.

Some weeks after that PAO conference Frank suggested to me that I might be happier taking on the Agency's inspection operation. An elegant solution.

Q: Chief Inspector. That was a whole new role for you, traveling the world and evaluating all kinds of USIS operations, large and small.

Troubles With A Politically AppointedArea Director

HEMSING: Yes. I had only been out once before as an inspector, heading a team to the Philippines, toward the end of my tour in Bonn. That had been an eye-opener into the Philippines' tragic society, a society which I felt, and do today, needs a genuine revolution. But in Washington I elected not to go out all that much. I was having a number of staffing problems and spent an inordinate amount of time with the Inspector General of the State Department. I supported his idea of joint State-USIA inspections but, after much work, the plan never really got off the ground. I did go on two small inspections, Tanzania and Madagascar, and on a major, month-long inspection of Mexico.

From my inspection experience, I can cite a concrete example of the deleterious consequences of putting political appointees in some positions at USIA, the question you raised earlier.

The then director of the Southeast Asia Area, the first political appointee on the Assistant Director level of the Agency, as far as I know—put there because his area included Vietnam—came to see me about an upcoming inspection in his area.

It was Hong Kong, and he wanted the PAO there fired, he said. I explained that he already had the authority to transfer the officer in question, and that “firing” was not the purpose of inspection, unless something most grievous is discovered.

Tom Tuch was to head the Hong Kong inspection, and a fairer, brighter, more experienced officer, could not be asked for. I made Tom aware of the conversation, and asked that he look into the matter; also, of course, to discuss the PAO with the Consul General.

In effect, the inspection report found for the PAO, though it described shortcomings on both sides in the PAO's relationship with his Area Director. The Consul General certainly did not want the PAO removed, which is why the area director had probably hoped to have his wishes done by the inspection process.

Well, the Area Director, with a fresh copy of the report in hand, stormed in to my office. “I know what you guys are up to, you all stick together, this is a whitewash,” and so on.

I tried to calm him down, explaining that neither whitewashes nor hatchet-jobs were my purpose. “Don't tell me how Washington works,” was his answer, “and I'm going to get you for this.”

I asked him to leave.

Q: Good for you.

HEMSING: I felt that my honor and Tom Tuch's were being questioned, and to hell with his threats.

Two years is about all that someone should be expected to do the inspection job.

1973: How Hemsing Became, Suddenly, PAO, India

Q: Suddenly, while you were Chief Inspector, there was need for a public affairs officer in New Delhi, India. You were given that assignment. Tell me what were the circumstances.

HEMSING: Another weird turn of fate. I had only sporadically kept in touch with Irving Kristol since our college days. He was then editor of Commentary, now of Public Interest. On a trip to New York to see our daughter, I called Irving and we had lunch. Irving had always hated to go abroad, except to England. He questioned me about life overseas and I told him that I had enjoyed my assignments, but that I was bored now in Washington.

A few days later the Agency was abuzz with the news that Dan Oleksiw had been fired by Daniel Moynihan, the new Ambassador to India.

Next thing I knew, Kristol called me to say that Moynihan had called him, asking whether Irving knew anyone to head USIS India—presumably someone from the outside. Was I interested, he asked me, and I said yes.

As a result, Moynihan requested me. The story went around that he and I were old pals, which was nonsense. We had both gone to the same East Harlem high school, but at different times, and to City College, a fact we only discovered at a reception earlier at Axel Springer's palatial suite in Berlin. Subsequently we met once more at a party at the George McGhees, in Bonn.

Moynihan, it turned out, had not only fired Dan, his Minister for Public Affairs, but also his DCM and Economic and Political Counselors. A clean sweep.

The Agency agreed to the assignment, it was at my level, and I was due out. So, suddenly, bang! There we were, Esther and I, in India. Once again my career conflicted with hers.

When I first got word about India, on the very day, she too was bursting with news. For five years she had worked her way up to head of publications for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Now AACT had bought an NEA journal and asked Esther whether she would be interested in becoming its editor. But, we sold our house in Old Town and left for India. Our daughter was taken care of since she was at Sarah Lawrence College.

We arrived in New Delhi in June 1973 to horrible heat and dust, but to a wonderful old British “bungalow” at 10 Tilak Marg, in central Delhi, away from the Embassy compound.

Q: This was your first assignment in the so-called Third World.

HEMSING: That's right. It was a very exciting experience, both on the colorful streets of Delhi, and in the embassy itself. Moynihan had assembled a splendid staff of career people, with David Schneider as DCM. We were soon a team, and I was never to experience there any of the back-biting and internecine warfare I had come to take for granted in Bonn.

The USIS program was, of course, huge in American and Indian staff and facilities.

Q: The largest, I believe.

HEMSING: Yes. Remember that at about that time we made a gift to the Indian Government of $2.5 billion dollars worth of rupees, 25 percent of the entire Indian currency in circulation. The sum was left over from our food aid to India, after the previous five years of famine.

Q: The so-called Public 480 Law.

HEMSING: Yes. But we kept enough rupees to run the embassy and USIS for years to come.

With those rupees, USIS ran a book publishing program and put out a glossy monthly magazine called SPAN. We ran a fine USIS library in New Delhi and in five other cities. Dan Oleksiw had carefully guarded these from the restructuring and weeding out that Alan Carter, the former area director, had demanded of his posts under his “Informat” scheme.

When Moynihan realized that I commanded lots of rupees in my budget, and that these would buy U.S.-India round trip air tickets, he prevailed on me—it took little prevailing—to invite his coterie of star-name intellectuals over to lecture (for an account of this star-name lecturer program from the Washington end, see interview with Leon Picon). We put on a series under the title “Modern Society and Traditional Government,” that was supposed to give Indian intellectuals food for thought about their own situation. I acted as moderator, and we filled the large auditorium of the USIS library in Delhi over a period of months.

Any PAO would be in seventh-heaven with such resources.

Q: The post, in fact, was important enough—still is, I'm sure—so that it commanded the title not of public affairs officer, or counselor, but minister.

HEMSING: Yes. In protocol terms I was number three at the embassy, second only to Dave Schneider, the Deputy Chief of Mission, or DCM

India Provided Total Immersion In Third WorldAmbience—A Refreshing Change From Europe

Q: We were talking about India and your rank there.

HEMSING: Yes. India was a total immersion in the Third World for Esther and me, and until this day we're glad not to have left the Foreign Service without this correction of our Europe-centered experience.

I found that I liked the Indians, but almost in inverse proportion to their socio-economic status. Some of the people on top were pretty intolerable. But Esther and I soon came to appreciate the decency of the average Indian, a human quality that transcends the language barrier and social distance. Despite their history of colonialism, communal strife and poor government, I can never see them really knuckling under, deep inside, to a dictator.

And they didn't knuckle under when Indira Gandhi turned dictator with the “emergency laws.” I experienced six months of that before we left in January 1976. In no time at all my morning breakfast chore, looking over ten Indian newspapers, became easy. Using the threat of withholding newsprint, entirely controlled by the state, the papers were soon “Gleichgeschaltet,” put on the same track, as the Nazis called it. I spent part of that time on the trail of the Indian Press Chief, (his office had become the censor's office), pulling American journalists out of the jug, e.g. Lewis Simon of the Washington Post. All of India turned to the BBC and VOA for news during that period.

Some Experiences With Moynihan As Ambassador

HEMSING: What about Moynihan?

Moynihan was great fun to work with, but not at his best as Ambassador. The robes of Senator fit him better.

Faced with an issue, Pat always went through a bedding-down process, throwing off ideas a-mile-a-minute, wise and foolish. Thank God he did not surround himself with yes-men. He needed and I suppose, still needs independent minds to do battle with. In the end, he would listen to reason, and do the necessary.

Even at the very end. As he was leaving Delhi to return to Harvard (Harvard had extended his tenure beyond the usual limits), he asked for a Sunday morning press meeting with the handful of American and foreign press there.

I arrived early and found him pounding away on his typewriter in the secluded pool-side house of his residence. He was not to be disturbed, he was making notes for his press conference. But his copy was being retyped by a secretary in the living room, where the meeting was to take place. Looking over his text, I was horrified. He attacked Indira Gandhi, he attacked Third World slavishness to the outworn ideas of British Socialism of the 30s, and he attacked the UN for being the sounding board of these ideas and the handmaiden of anti-Americanism. The UN, I remember, was described as a dead carcass of man's hope.

Soon Dave Schneider arrived and he was equally horrified. We marched into the pool house and remonstrated with Pat, saying he must wait until he got back home to say his piece. “All right, since you leave me nothing to say, I'll say nothing,” was the reply.

My guess is that, had we not stopped him, he would probably never have been named as our Ambassador to the UN, the position he used as a stepping-stone to the Senate. But, as often happens in our business, I found no hint of memory of that occasion the one time I asked his help as Senator. That was in connection with the rumpus at Radio Free Europe.

Moynihan found it impossible to suffer fools, which is, also, part of any ambassador's job when it comes to maintaining necessary contacts with government officials and fellow diplomats. He scared Indira Gandhi off with his reputation as an intellect. She saw Moynihan only twice, I believe, during his entire stay.

William Saxbe was quite a contrast as Ambassador, with his love of country music and his spittoon, within easy aim of his stand-up desk in the embassy. Former governor of

Ohio and U.S. Attorney General, Saxbe the politician proved to be the more effective Ambassador. Of course, for much of his time U.S.-Indian relations were “on hold” because of India's emergency rule. I regretted leaving his staff at that juncture, when I resigned from the Agency.

1976 Hemsing Resigns From USIA; Appointed Director Of Radio Free Europe (RFE) But Trouble Awaited There

Q: You decided that you would retire and leave the Agency.

HEMSING: Yes, I had been promoted, prematurely, I suppose, to Class 1 in 1967, at the age of 46. But, like others in the top class, by 1976 I had not had a raise or a cost-of-living increase for some nine years. Congress was too chicken then to raise its own salary, so we, at the top level, were also frozen.

We left India in January 1976. En route to Munich, I looked up our ambassadors in the East European capitals by way of preparing for my new assignment as director of Radio Free Europe. Some of the embassies thought the station occasionally went overboard in its attacks on the local regimes, but supported RFE's mission.

My itinerary (chosen to save RFE money) was held against me in Munich. On my arrival there some of my American colleagues-to-be charged me with having “met with the enemy, before hearing our side of the story.” I was also greeted by a petition, signed by the majority of the language broadcast staffs, protesting my appointment.

You see, I was the first RFE director not to have been appointed by the CIA. RFE and Radio Liberty were then being funded openly, in the State Department budget, and they had been put under an oversight board, the Board for International Broadcasting. But the American personnel at RFE had changed hardly at all. They all had been on the CIA payroll at the stations, and some had been CIA agents. These were determined to get rid of the “State Department Hatchet man,” as they billed me to the language broadcasters.

Well, as Fiorello La Guardia used to say, “When I make a mistake, I make a beaut!” Our daughter had begged me not to become associated with RFE, but I did not listen.

I have no desire to dwell on my 18 months in Munich. Measured against a long career, it was but a single night's bad dream. Overall, the station performs a useful and needed function. Its central, English-language newsroom and its research section are highly professional. Both were run by Englishmen when I was there.

The “emigre crazies” I had been warned about turned out to be decent, dedicated people, though not radio professionals by and large. The “crazies” actually turned out to be a few of the veteran Americans there.

Q: They were Cold Warriors of the 1950s?

HEMSING: Yes, and poor propagandists, and even poorer broadcasters to boot. Their attitude toward the emigres was authoritarian. But they had the ear of Sig Mikelson; in fact they had him in their pocket.

Mikelson had been brought in by the Board for International Broadcasting as President of RFE/RL, Inc., and he sat in Washing- ton. In him the Board thought to have found a professional broad-caster, a real live, commercial radio executive. A new broom that would sweep clean. Well, the new broom had indeed removed my predecessor when staff disputes made his position in Munich untenable. But, in no time at all, that very same person came out of the doghouse to become Mikelson's most trusted advisor in Washington. Understandably so, after all, Mikelson knew little about the Munich radios, and even less about Eastern Europe or American foreign policy.

I soon developed my own agenda for RFE, using RIAS Berlin as a model. As PAO Berlin, I had often attended the station's editorial meetings and knew a deal about its budget, staffing and mode of operation.

Frictions Between Hemsing And President Of RFE/RL Sitting Back In Washington Finally Caused Hemsing's Departure From RFE

But the antagonism between Mikelson and me grew apace, fanned by his erratic, long-distance, intervention on programming. I was asked to resign, but insisted on being fired. Simultaneously he also removed the director of Radio Liberty. That double-whammy finally woke up the hitherto complacent Board from its inattention. A few months later the Board gave Mikelson the choice between moving to Munich himself, and running the radios on the spot, or resigning, but he would not be allowed to stay in Washington, where he was building up more and more staff. He resigned. During all this, the executive secretary of the Board was Walter Roberts, an ex-USIA colleague, and the man who had recruited me for RFE. Walter kept a low profile, and proved once again that he could always land on his feet, no matter how odious the circumstances.

What really hurt me about my brief encounter with RFE was not my premature departure—Esther and I were overjoyed to get out of the strange, hot-house atmosphere of the radios in Munich—it was what happened next.

Hardly back in New York, I was pointed to an opening at UNICEF by a friend at the United Nations. A Dutch deputy there soon decided that I was the right man to become the project officer on their “Year of the Child” campaign, a year-long special project. I knew I could handle the work and was delighted by the purposes of the project. He assured me that I had the job, all that remained were the formalities. But my RFE connection was to add insult to injury in the form of UNICEF's long-time American director, George Labouisse. “I want no taint of the CIA on my staff,” he told his deputy, and had him quash my appointment. The Director-General of our Foreign Service had the U.S. Mission to the UN make representations on my behalf. As usual, they were ineffective. I knew it was a lost cause.

Fortunately, at Esther's prodding, we had bought a co-op apartment on East 79th Street a year before, and it was there that we settled down to enjoy New York, and our old friends there. Josephine lived down the street from us.

Though she paid us several visits in India, we had had to sacrifice close contact with our daughter since the day she went off to college in 1971. We three found it a great comfort to be close again. Like so many others in the Foreign Service, we had become a tightly-knit, nuclear family; even though my work had kept me from home many a time. The back and forth of our gypsy life had also made strong demands on her, especially the abrupt transition from an elitist German “Gymnasium” in Bonn, to the hurly-burly of an Alexandria, Virginia high school in the throes of the 1968 youth revolt. Now she had become an independent young American adult, still with a touch of Europe; a person worth knowing.

Q: But then, after some time, you went back to Germany again, to sort of complete the circle, as director of the German-American Institute in Freiburg.

1978: After Some Time Away From Work, Hemsing Accepts Offer To Return To Germany On Contract As Director of America Haus in Freiburg

HEMSING: Yes. Our life in New York was fine, but I was bored without work, a failing on my part. Fortunately, Alec Klieforth called me one day. We were old friends from Berlin where he had been the RIAS director. At that time he was the Country PAO in Bonn. Alec asked whether he might propose my name to the Board of the Carl-Schurz-Haus, the German-American Institute in Freiburg, where they were looking for a new director. I unhesitatingly said yes.

Older members of the board in Freiburg, Dr. Bauer of the University, and the deputy mayor of the town, actually remembered me as the official who had come there, back in 1963, to close the Institute down. But they were happy to hire me nevertheless. Another of fate's ironies. A delightful one this time.

We arrived in Freiburg, one of the most picturesque and delightful cities in Germany, in August 1978. Freiburg is a university town of 175,000, gateway to the Black Forest, located in Southwest Germany near Basel and Colmar. My mother was born 30 kilometers to the west, on the French side of the Rhine, in Alsace. Full cycle indeed. We eventually looked up a flock of cousins there, feted with “Gugehopf” cake and the local Riesling wine.

One of the pleasures of working in Freiburg was the opportunity for direct contact with the community, and especially with the university students who were our prime audience. To the Freiburgers, Esther and I stood for Mr. and Mrs. America in our five years there.

A deep satisfaction was my relationship with Heinz Scheer, the Institute's long-time program director who was married to an English woman, Sheila, who taught at the university. Heinz, exactly my age, was one of the best examples of the bright young, university-trained Germans who cast their lot in with USIS soon after the war. He had a keen mind and deeply democratic instincts. The local business elders considered him a bit of a Red. He was killed by a careening drunk driver shortly after we left Freiburg.

Life in Freiburg had been extremely pleasant, and we could have stayed on and on. But as our fifth anniversary there approached, Esther and I agreed that it was time to go home. We did, in August 1983.

Retirement Activities

Q: All those of us in retirement, I suppose, retain some vestiges of the things that motivated us in our careers. I know that you are now involved in recapturing old films out of NATO and Europe, that they may be seen for the first time, I suppose, by the American public.

Recapturing Old Marshall Plan FilmsTo Show In U.S.

HEMSING: That's correct, Bob. Two years ago, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the launching of the Marshall Plan, and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (in Washington) asked me to help them with their commemorative plans, as a consultant. They mounted two large traveling exhibits, one in the U.S., the other in Europe, and a jumbo conference in Berlin that brought together young leaders from America and from all over Europe to discuss the Marshall Plan approach in the light of some of the world's contemporary problems.

That connection gave me the opportunity, later, to propose and obtain a grant from the Fund to dig out the many motion pictures I helped make for the Marshall Plan. I found most of them, unindexed, buried at our National Archives, and subsequently identified about 30 more in the NATO film archive in Brussels—about 160 films in all. I am about to leave for Brussels to dislodge those there, and get them copied at our Archives.

None of these films has ever been seen in America because Congress, way back, decreed that they could only be shown overseas. I am working through Senator Kerry to get legislation passed to lift that ban. (Editor's note: the legislation did pass, and henceforth these films, and all USIA films that are more than 12 years old, will be available to the U.S. public.)

When all that is done, I am to produce a catalogue of the films, and see to it that universities and other film libraries in America buy prints. There is also some interest at PBS-TV. The project is strongly endorsed by the American Historical Association.

Q: So these are all Marshall Plan films?

HEMSING: Yes. They were seen by millions of Europeans, in movie houses, at the time they were made.

Ruminations On Future Structure And Operations Of USIA As It Is Today Compared With The Past

Q: Looking back over a long and distinguished career, what are some of the themes that seem especially significant to you? There's a continuing argument that goes on in the Foreign Service community and within USIA, as to whether USIA's culture and information work should remain amalgamated, or whether they should be separated once again. How do you feel on that subject?

HEMSING: For somebody who came up, obviously, on the information side of USIA, it may surprise some—probably not you, Bob—that I think the more important part of the Agency's work is not information, but the cultural side: exchange of persons, lectures, seminars, libraries, and so on. I used to hotly defend the idea of USIA as a separate agency, and that was right in the period that it needed to establish itself and to carve out a sphere for itself in the foreign affairs community. I am not yet sure that we have convinced all our colleagues in the State Department, fully convinced them, that we are co-equal workers in the vineyard of foreign affairs.

But the fact is that in the last ten or fifteen years one speaks more and more of public diplomacy. That indicates to me that the world has come to recognize that public diplomacy is an important component of diplomacy. Not “open covenants, openly arrived at”—negotiation requires shelter—but, what do we say in the Declaration of Independence—”A decent respect to the opinions of mankind.” That's really what public diplomacy is all about. As the world moves toward popular government and modern communications bring more and more information to the common man, America has to explain itself to the world—out of a decent respect for others. That means not only explaining and defending our foreign policy, but also explaining the context of our foreign policy—our society and the way our political processes operate. That is important. “Contexting” is what the so-called “cultural” side of USIA is all about.

Where am I at today? While I don't think the world would come to an end if USIA were broken up, I would be dead against reducing the totality of the effort. Obviously, though, the Voice of America could function as a separate entity under the Board for International Broadcasting. The press/information function, in direct support of U.S. foreign policy, could be carried by press attach#s in the field, back-stopped by the State Department in Washington.

That would leave all the rest, and the rest is what I consider most important. That work might be undertaken by something like an “American Council”. The effort would have to be closely tied in with our academic, cultural and arts communities and institutions at home. It would have to be decidedly more vigorous than the British Council, and far better funded.

On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with the way USIA is now, if some of the layers of Washington bureaucracy could be dissolved away, and if the cultural effort could be better shielded from the passing political whims of changing administrations.

One must take one's hat off to Director Charles Wick's ability to generate extra funds for USIA, and for up-grading and modernizing USIA's and VOA's technical facilities, something long overdue.

But I wonder whether those costly satellite TV transmissions he favors, Worldnet and all that, is worth the cost of putting some of America's best minds together with their opposite numbers abroad, on a face-to-face basis.

And as for USIA's frantic pursuit of ever more selective “target-audiences”, let's be a little more humble and realistic. The scruffy youngster reading a book at some USIS library today, may be the Gandhi of tomorrow, Mahatma I mean.

Q: That seems a good note on which to end this interview. Thank you.

End of interview